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Guest post: Putin grabs the Crimea but loses Ukraine

Mar 17, 2014 2:28pm by guest writer

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By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has said that Russia reserves the right to intervene in eastern Ukraine in defence of ‘persecuted’ Russian speakers. This, and Russia’s annexation of the Crimea, will not be not welcomed throughout the former USSR, where Russian speakers are

scattered in enclaves. After all, in the autumn of 2008 none of Russia’s allies, even the pro-Russian Belarus and Kazakhstan, followed Moscow in recognising the independence of the two Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia’s MFA statement on March 15 came after five deaths were reported from violent clashes in Donetsk and Kharkiv. I spent three days in Kharkiv last week and was in the city on the night of the violence. Kharkiv was calm and peaceful for most of my time there although many people were apprehensive that Russia was building up its forces about 30 km across the border near Belgorod.

On my first day I went to a rally in support of Hennadiy Kernes, the controversial pro-Moscow mayor who was summoned to the prosecutor’s office after being put under criminal investigation. Ukrainian flags were everywhere to be seen, with only one orange and black striped flag of St George, the symbol adopted by pro-Russian forces in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine. No Russian flags were in sight.

A Euromaidan ribbon tied to my rucksack did not cause any heckling or violence the whole time I was in Kharkiv.

The violence on Friday March 14 was isolated and did not reflect the calm mood prevalent in Kharkiv, a prosperous city. It has a large student population, from the Arab world, Africa and elsewhere, to some of whom I gave a seminar on the Euromaidan revolution and Russia and the Crimean crisis.

Violence in Kharkiv and Donetsk between rival political groups is out of character for

eastern Ukraine and is an artificial strategy imported by Vladimir Putin, Russia's president to create chaos. Fake statements are emanating from Russian speakers requesting Russian 'protection' and intervention, which the MFA is promising to heed.

But Putin's strategy is backfiring and leading to a surge of Ukrainian patriotism. Within a week of the adoption of a law creating a Ukrainian National Guard, 40, 000 volunteers, many from Euromaidan self-defence units, signed up for what is set to become an elite force. Military recruitment centres have been thronged by volunteers.

Ukrainians were reluctant to be drawn into a fight in the hostile territory that is the Crimea but are actively making preparations to fight for eastern Ukraine. Military bases in Kharkiv such as that at Chuhuyevare are readying for what Oleksandr Turchynov, Ukraine's acting president, says could become a Russian invasion. Ukrainian airborne forces have pushed back a Russian advance unit on the Crimean-Kherson administrative border.

Kharkiv was a centre for Soviet Ukraine's military-industrial complex and has many academies for branches of the military and police where thousands of cadets receive instruction. A Russian intervention into Kharkiv would suck in volunteers and military units from neighbouring Poltava and Sumy regions that have traditionally voted for the opposition. In the 2004 presidential elections, Sumy, the home region of the pro-western Viktor Yushchenko, voted for him in similarly high numbers as what Putin believes to be 'nationalistic' western Ukraine.

The outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine would be a signal for Tatars, who boycotted the referendum, to launch a guerrilla war in the Crimea. This would attract support from the millions of the Tatar diaspora in Turkey and from war-toughened jihadists in the northern Caucasus.

Putin, although he claims to feel empathy for the Soviet Union, has never understood the deeply felt patriotism that the Soviet regime inculcated in Ukrainians and other non-Russian peoples and their loyalty to republican borders. Putin also habitually confuses ethnic Russians with Russian speakers.

In the USSR, the non-Russian republics had their own Soviet institutions such as a republican communist party and academy of sciences, which Russia never possessed. Soviet Ukraine, the second largest Soviet republic, had the largest republican communist party in the Soviet Union.

In Moscow there were only Soviet institutions, leading to a conflation of Soviet and Russian identities, evidence of which we see in Putin. Russia alone of the 15 republics never declared independence from the USSR.

Ultimately, Putin is no different from the ethnic Ukrainian nationalists he allegedly despises in not believing that a Russian-speaking Ukrainian could be a Ukrainian patriot. Yet, such examples of Russian-speaking Ukrainian patriots are countless in all walks of life, including opposition leader Vitaliy Klitschko and internationally acclaimed novelist Andrey Kurkov.

A strategy ostensibly meant to 'defend' Russian speakers and maintain Ukraine within the *Ruskyi Mir* (Russian World), Putin's invasion and annexation of the Crimea has torn it apart. March 16, when the Crimea held its referendum, made

Ukraine even more determined to sign an Association Agreement with the EU six days later. The referendum and the signing are the undoing of Russian-Ukrainian unity.

What has been conspicuously absent from analysis of the Crimean crisis is the symbolism of the year 1954, when the Crimea was transferred from Russia to Ukraine. The official Soviet reason for the transfer was to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the ‘reunion’ of Ukraine and Russia in 1654, when Ukrainian Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky signed the Treaty of Pereyaslav with the Muscovite (Russian) tsar.

Soviet propaganda and historiography indoctrinated Ukrainians and Russians into the belief that they should be forever united and that Ukrainians seeking independence were traitors, Nazi collaborators or the agents of NGOs financed by the west. True to his *homo Sovieticus* mentality, Putin really does believe there was a US conspiracy behind the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan.

The majority of Russians have never seen Ukrainians as a separate people, as Germans see Austrians, for example. Instead, they see them as Prussians see Bavarians and view an independent Ukraine as an historical aberration. Putin, unlike his predecessor Borys Yeltsin in the 1990s, has never respected Ukrainian independence.

Putin’s annexation of the Crimea and Ukraine’s integration into Europe have driven nails into the coffin of Ukrainian-Russian unity on its 360th anniversary. Putin will go down in history not as he had hoped as the unifier of ‘Russian lands’ but as gaining the Crimea and losing Ukraine.

Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Centre for Political and Regional Studies, Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta.

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